



Historical Social Research

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doi: 10.12759/hsr.48.2023.39

Published in:
Historical Social Research 48 (2023) 4

Cite as:

Martín Hernán Di Marco. 2023.
“Stop it with Mommy and Daddy!” Analyzing How Accounts of People in Prison
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Historical Social Research 48 (4): 55-80. doi: 10.12759/hsr.48.2023.39

“Stop it with Mommy and Daddy!” Analyzing How Accounts of People in Prison Change with Their Trajectory in Argentinean Penal Institutions

Martín Hernán Di Marco*

Abstract: »Hör' mir auf mit Mama und Papa!« *Wie sich biographische Darstellungen von Insassen argentinischer Gefängnisse im Laufe ihrer Haft verändern*«. The relationship between adverse childhood experiences and criminality has been amply explored in criminology and the social sciences. A plethora of scholarly theories has focused on the impact of abandonment by one's parents, among other events, in the development of criminal careers. Originating in the Global North, where it has been much promoted, this hypothesis has turned into a *doxa* overriding the need to account for sociocultural contexts. Drawing upon narrative criminology, this paper analyses how the life stories of people in prison change with their institutional trajectories, being shaped by official penal discourses. Based on the analysis of 30 life stories with inmates in Argentinean prisons, this paper argues that prison narratives guide explanations of crime towards family dynamics and, consequently, decontextualize life histories. Nonetheless, interviewees contested mainstream expert theories – while skillfully using them to navigate the system – as a response to the attempted institutional alienation of their biographies. In contesting dominant theories, participants are resisting not just local prison culture but also transnational colonial networks of knowledge production. Revisiting dominant frameworks that mechanically take for granted the impact of childhood experiences constitutes a path of inquiry that contributes to an understanding of prison narratives.

Keywords: Life stories, narratives, prison; family, parents, abandonment, delinquency, southern criminology, Argentina.

1. Introduction

The relationships between family, upbringing, and criminality have been amply explored in criminology and social sciences, among other fields. A

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plethora of scholarly theories has focused on the impact of abandonment by one's parents, among other events, in the development of criminal careers (Downes, Rock, and McLaughlin 2016; Gibson and Krohn 2013). This line of research has oriented penal programs and prison technical staff to focus their interventions on how people in prison relate to their relatives, establish new social relationships, and talk about their own pasts. However, the narrative effects of these hegemonic theories in penal institutions (i.e., psychological, social, and probation programs) have been understudied in the Global South, neglecting the comprehension of their geopolitical nature and their effect on people's biographical reconstructions (Carrington et al. 2018).

Narrative theorists have argued that storytelling and sensemaking are connected to the narratives that are available to actors (Plummer 1997). A range of concepts, such as accounts (Butler 2005; Scott and Lyman 1968) and dominant discourses (Bogner and Rosenthal 2017), have been coined to explain how the interpretations of actors are grounded, at least partially, on their contexts. For instance, Jarman (2019) argues that interactions in prison shape folk theories of crime; Di Marco (2022a) describes how going through prison alters how lethal violence is seen and talked about by perpetrators; and Rosenthal (2010) shows how prevalent discourses in the public space shape stories and memories of genocide perpetrators. Crewe (2009) has argued that, in their adjustment to prison, men subordinate themselves to the institutional regulations to which they were subjected. These studies underscore how contexts create the conditions for what people say. As Reiter (2012) points out, the alienation of biographies by dominant discourses (i.e., shaping what it is relevant to say and how) can be often identified in these processes.

Nonetheless, narratives are not merely speeches that are imposed on people. As interactionist scholars have long argued (Tewksbury and Gagné 2001; Rogers 1992), actors interpret situations and norms, and organize their own course of action, based on the available resources at hand. Hence, stories can be seen as a form of capital (Burchardt 2016). In the context of any relationship, talking about oneself and engaging in biographical self-narratives produce value and create moral boundaries (Goodson 2012). Portraying oneself in a certain light, highlighting aspects of an event, and deciding if, what, and how to tell a story can be a valuable tool with which to achieve a certain persona and shape an interaction. Telling anecdotes and reminiscing about lived experiences implies using stories as strategic resources. Stories can be used as leverage in courthouses (O'Connor 2000) or deployed to gain sympathy and foster relationships that are key to navigating the penal system (Gariglio 2018).

The analysis of dominant discourses bears considerable relevance considering the structural changes made to penal systems in recent decades. In the United States and Latin America, prisons have faced a sharp increase in their incarceration rates and a simultaneous lack of humanitarian conditions

within facilities (Wacquant 2021). In the past few decades, mass imprisonment has been the main response to the public outcry over deteriorating public safety. As in most countries in the region, Argentinean prisons are overcrowded (at 117% capacity) and deficient in basic living conditions (i.e., food, clothing, supplies) (Bergman and Fondevila 2021). Longstanding human rights violations have been reported for decades, indicating the fragile institutional state of the prison system (CELS 2016). Furthermore, the extended effects of incarceration transcend people in prison, shaping the livelihoods of their relatives and friends (Ferrecchio 2017). Regardless of Argentina's persistent punitive policies and structural poverty, pervasive technical narratives remain targeted on the families and childhoods of people in prison as the main source of crime.

In the context of crime in Latin America-CRIMLA (RCN/NFR: 324299) – a large-scale qualitative study in Latin America focused on the life stories of people in prison – I am interested in analyzing the interaction between storytelling, penal institutions, and the mainstream theories employed by institutional actors. How do life stories change during prison sentences? Which aspects shape storytelling and how do they affect biographical reconstructions? Moreover, how are the geopolitics of knowledge inscribed in such changes?

The aim of this paper is to analyze how biographical reconstructions of people change throughout their trajectories in prison. In this study, I am particularly interested in analyzing the stories that are used to explain the onset of criminal careers.¹ By doing so, I intend to analyze the scripts at hand to talk about their own lives, their theories about upbringing and crime, and hegemonic discourses in the penal system.

The following section provides a brief review of how expert theories about criminality and family are tied to the geopolitics of knowledge; this section serves as a critical theoretical frame to the paper's argument. The third section describes the methodological strategy used to analyze the life stories of incarcerated people and highlights the narrative nature of the study. The fourth section presents the main empirical results, and it is divided into four domains of inquiry: changing the focus of the accounts, blurring the contexts of people's lives, contesting expert theories, and using expert knowledge as a resource with which to navigate the penal system. The discussion focuses on two aspects: how stories change according to institutional conditions and rationalities, and simultaneously how life stories are used to navigate through the penal system.

¹ A preliminary version of this paper was presented to the session on "Doing Global Sociology in Polarized Worlds: Methodological Approaches from Qualitative Social Research" at the conference of the German Sociological Association in September 2023. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Dr. Lu Gram for his review of the manuscript prior to submission.

2. Hegemonic Theories and Crime

Social sciences and criminology have a long history of studying the life course of people in prison (Carlsson and Sarnecki 2016). The origins of criminology and adjacent fields, such as the sociology of deviance, are connected to the development of Eurocentric modern sciences (Ciocchini and Greener 2021). Theories developed about biographies and criminal actions are tied to the geopolitical nature of knowledge. As Connell (2007) argues, the uneven production of theories and terminologies is grounded in deeply rooted colonial relationships. Universalism, decontextualization and the lack of acknowledgment of local history and social dynamics are among the core aspects of Northern colonial theories (Dimou 2021). Furthermore, the unequal knowledge production and hierarchical flow of expert knowledge impacts on how penal interventions and actions are designed.

Southern and other critical criminologists have questioned the colonial dimensions of criminological theories and criminal justice (Melossi et al. 2011). In order to understand the practices of crime control and the production of knowledge, it is crucial to inquire about the genealogy of theories, categories, and technologies in criminology (Aliverti, Carvalho, and Sozzo 2021). The privileged status of “classic” theories and scholars (Moosavi 2019), as well as Anglo-American dominance and bias (Franko Aas 2012), are two clear indicators of this situation.

Local intellectuals and policy-makers have borrowed from the mainstream narratives of the Global North, yet also produced innovations, triggering re-adaptations of established frameworks in criminology (Fonseca 2018; Sozzo 2011). The ways of labelling, interpreting, and addressing crime infiltrate all penal-related institutions, including rehabilitation and reintegration programs (Aliverti, Carvalho, and Sozzo 2021). Most importantly, reproducing the “criminological question” uncritically fosters a colonized criminological gaze, blocking the possibility to reimage concepts and instruments in criminology (Aliverti, Carvalho, and Sozzo 2021; Aliverti et al. 2023). While this does not mean denying the existence of resistance, it highlights the bigger picture in knowledge production and the configurations of penal systems.

In this context, the family has long been a focal point of public intervention and narratives (Donzelot 1977). State actions related to the regulation of family affairs are a long-standing aspect of modern governments as a privileged biopolitical way of modulating and shaping individuals. In the penal system, family regulation and non-legal coercive normalization (the alignment with certain forms of social conduct) are crucial actions in penal and social institutions (McCallum 2016). Additionally, preventive rationality is inseparable from the maintenance of social, economic, and gender inequalities (Aedo and Faba 2022). Immigrant families, for instance, have been the target of

governmental interventions, based on ideas about the relationship between criminality and “adequate” upbringing (Martin 2012). Overall, theories in the penal system stress the key role of “failed” upbringing in producing crime.

Theories about subjective change and desistance have also focused on the family. For instance, father absence (McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider 2013; Harper and McLanahan 2004) and specific types of family structure (Apel and Kaukinen 2008) have been associated with the development of “antisocial” and criminal behavior. Similarly, the role of family structure and parenting has been theorized as relevant to the process of desisting from crime (Haigh 2009; Sampson and Laub 2007).

The medicalization of crime has also shown how expert knowledge and the judicial system interact. Guided by the risk factor approach and the search for triggering events, the biomedical lens on crime has fostered a discourse of danger and risk (Mitjavila et al. 2016). This has promoted expert interpretations that tend to simplify and decontextualize social phenomena (Ardebili and Saeedinejad 2021), excluding how sensemaking is related to criminal careers. The inclusion of trauma in expert language (Fassin 2009), for instance, has boosted this process by focusing on the individual aspects of collective processes.

For women, the medicalization of criminal careers has specific features, such as a disproportionate preference for correctional psy intervention (Kilty 2012) and an assumption of prior family-related problems (Tompalski and Romanik 2019). This is illustrated by the medicalization (and criminalization) of abortion (Halfmann 2012). Reflecting Northern-centric and positivistic views, these discourses about the “aetiology of crime” have become hegemonic. Thus, the depoliticization of crime focuses the attention of technical staff on either individuals or their immediate surroundings (e.g., the family).

Mainstream theories of crime play a significant role in the development of current policy and legislation, hence the relevance of a broader analysis in Global Sociology (Hanafi 2019). Metropolitan theories (Collyer et al. 2019) are updated and imported into the Global South through a global network of institutions, including scientific organizations, academic journals, educational institutions, and standardized intervention programs.

A range of critical theories has emerged in recent decades, contesting this global *doxa*. Southern criminology (Cortez 2022) and decolonization theories (Smith 2008; Collyer et al. 2019), among others, have questioned the dominant tendency to export theories from the center to the peripheries. For instance, foregrounding indigenous voices (Au 2022) represents a strategy to include contextualized viewpoints into an otherwise depoliticized analysis. These approaches have underscored how penal hegemonic discourses are detached from local realities. The epistemological shift in criminological knowledge offered by Southern studies poses a challenge to prevailing narratives that attempt to universalize their stories (Dimou 2021).

While critical criminological studies have a long tradition in Western academia, Southern theories have contributed to new insights in the field (Aliverti, Carvalho, and Sozzo 2021). These alternative discourses have highlighted the uneven distribution of wealth in research, the different epistemological principles on which crime studies are grounded, and the divergent practical implications (Carrington et al. 2018; Connell 2007). Moreover, these theories have addressed how different cultural values might influence criminological thought in non-Western societies and, most notably, how they have engaged with cultural and material realities in Southern countries (Travers 2017).

The focus of penal policies on the family is not unique to Latin America and Southern contexts. Nonetheless, this approach has significant political relevance in marginalized regions, due to its tendency to fail to acknowledge the social conditions shaping life courses. Economic hardships, structural poverty, and disadvantaged geopolitical relationships overlap with increasing punitive policies (Bergman and Fondevila 2021; Carrington et al. 2018). In this context, carceral institutions in the South are more susceptible to reproducing structural inequalities and individualizing social phenomena (Smith 2008).

Although the cited literature emphasizes how stories are oriented by certain accounts more than others, this does not imply the absence of coexisting alternative narratives. The hegemony of theories and knowledge “does not obliterate all others,” as Connell (2007, xi) puts it. Instead, these other interpretations are demeaned.

Drawing upon narrative criminology, this paper discusses how penal institutions shape the life stories of incarcerated people over time. By doing so, I attempt to link how change in sensemaking is connected to a broader discursive scenario. My interest is in inquiring if and how the accounts of incarcerated people change and how these alterations might be connected to the carceral devices to which they are subject. By doing so, I frame this study in a broader debate: Global Sociology has been keen to consider the flow of knowledge that shapes the social sciences so unevenly (Hanafi 2019), as well as penal policies and interventions. Considering the local effects of the narrative hegemony of crime theories (which are more often produced and disseminated in central countries) is key to deciphering how institutional interventions and their often forgotten discursive consequences work and affect people’s lives.

3. Methods

This paper draws on extended fieldwork over a period of seven years in prisons in Argentina. It combines data from two research projects, which applied

the same methodological strategy: my PhD project, developed in Argentinean prisons between 2015 and 2021; and data from Crime in Latin America-CRIMLA (RCN/NFR: 324299), a large qualitative study of the lives of people in prison in Latin America. This paper is based on a subsample of 30 life stories of incarcerated cis-gender men and women from Argentina.

A quota sample was collected, which accounted for the four crimes with the highest rates in Latin America: robbery, drug-dealing, homicide (including femicide), and sexual assault. The sample consisted of an equal number of women and men. Regarding their education, 30% of the participants had finished primary school prior to imprisonment, 62% had finished high school and 8% had university degrees. Of the sample, 40% were between 18 and 25 at the moment of the crime, 46% were between 26-35, and 14% were over 35. The average length of time spent in prison at the moment of the interview was 6.5 years.

All the participants included in this sample admitted to committing the crime they had been charged with. This aspect was one of our exclusion criteria, as wrongful imprisonment in Argentina is part of a broader discussion of *causas armadas* (framing people for crimes) (CELS 2017). Data collection took place in four sites belonging to the Argentinean penitentiary system, including institutions of federal and municipal administrative areas, and maximum and intermediate-security levels. The interviews were conducted and analyzed by the same researcher who recruited the sample.

Interviews were repeated within a six-year period, most of them being separated by at least two months. The first sessions with the participants took place during my PhD fieldwork and were later resumed during the development of the second project. While merging the data from the two projects was not originally planned, the similar nature of the methodologies and objectives used allowed continuity in the trajectory of the research. Temporality was a key aspect of this study, as the unplanned re-immersion in fieldwork provided grounds for analyzing the changes in the narrations (Rabelo and Souza 2003).

In most institutions, there were no specific “rehabilitation” or “resocialization” programs.² Individual psychological sessions were available for those who were interested in them, but there was no group therapy in these prisons. However, a wide range of activities was offered to the inmates: university courses and academic activities (reading groups, short workshops, etc.), consultations with lawyers, and meetings and audiences with judges and technical staff of the judicial system. No gender-related discussion or specific device was identified.

In order to encourage the participants to guide the conversations themselves, repeated unstructured narrative interviews were used (Rosenthal

² I refer to these concepts as the mainstream terms used in the penal system. However, I acknowledge the legitimate criticisms of them (see Melossi, Sozzo, and Brandariz García 2017).

2018). An average of three sessions (min.: two sessions; max.: five sessions) with each participant were conducted as a strategy to promote trust, obtain detailed descriptions, and encourage the reconstruction of life events. Repeated open-ended interviews allowed rapport to be created and, for the purposes of this paper, permitted accounts to be compared over time.

All interviews began by asking the participants to tell their life stories. For this research, it was crucial to allow an initial unguided conversation, which would permit the participants to structure the conversation according to their own rationalities and terms (Schütze 1983). Follow-up questions and paraphrasing statements were used to encourage them to elaborate their discourses (Rapley 2001). Intrinsic questions (i.e., questions that arise from the interview dialogue) were usually used after the second session (Chaitin 2004).

The interviews lasted 90 minutes on average and were recorded digitally. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and transcribed in the same language. Field notes were taken *in situ*. Complete transcripts were given to the interviewees in case they wanted to read the conversations. Participants were asked to comment, modify, rephrase, or delete the content of the interviews in case they wanted to.

Participants were informed that the study was focused on understanding their perspectives, worldviews, and how they explained significant events in their lives. The aim of identifying changes to their stories was established after fieldwork. I believe that the repeated interviews during months of fieldwork, the unstructured nature of the conversations, and the spontaneous topics addressed contributed to establishing well-grounded material for the analysis (Atkinson 2012). Furthermore, sharing the transcripts with them fostered their motivation to participate and encouraged their participation (Di Marco and Sandberg 2023; Rowlands 2021).

A qualitative approach was employed for the analysis, following the broad guidelines of narrative analysis (Sandberg 2022). Codes were created inductively, following a thematic perspective (Braun and Clarke 2006). This study focuses on changes to the participants' self-presentation over time and the accounts provided to rationalize how they began their criminal careers. The *verbatim*s used in this paper have been translated into English by the authors.

Ethical approval was provided by the Ethical Committees of the National Hospital Alejandro Posadas and the Gino Germani Research Institute (Buenos Aires University). Informed consents were used, in written and verbal forms, and data are kept confidential on hard-drives and an online secure platform. To anonymize the participants, pseudonyms are used.

4. Stories about Families, Contexts, and Wittiness

In the following sections, I explore four domains in the accounts: a) changes in the focus of the life stories; b) the pre-eminence of context in the biographical reconstructions; c) disagreements and challenges about institutional theories; and d) how the participants made use of institutionalized expert knowledge. These dimensions stood out as the most relevant to identifying changes in the sense-making processes.

4.1 Refocusing Stories

I interviewed Sebastián (26 years old) for the first time in 2016. He had just been incarcerated for first-degree homicide of a neighbor. During our first conversation, he talked about the crime, his girlfriend, and his gang. When he introduced the topic of his first steps in crime, he emphasized his decision to get into “this life”:

I think it's personal, it's different for everyone. For instance, I'm here because I've always been a rebel, and I always wanted my money. So, going out with a gun and collecting [money] was a logical thing, you know? [...]. I don't think my family had anything to do with that. [...]. I've always been into this life.

Rebelliousness, seeking autonomy, and gaining financial independence were the key aspects he emphasized when explaining his life course. Rebel narratives are hegemonic ways to claim agency and to be able to separate the self from one's context (Di Marco 2022b; Ferrito, Needs, and Adshead 2016). In these life reconstructions, the storyteller decides their own path.

I interviewed Sebastián again ten months later. At his request, he had been moved to a different facility to be closer to his family – a common strategy to change prison units, seek better living conditions and, in his case, avoid conflict with other inmates. During this interview, Sebastián presented a novel understanding of his life:

Liza [the social worker] has been telling me that I should continue with the workshop and that could grant me the weekends off next year. [...]. After reaching out to my father, things moved more. I mean, here, because they see that I'm taking care of this issue and personally as well. [...]. It's been tough revisiting every aspect of my family history, but I've learned that many other men here went down similar paths.

Focusing and refocusing inmates' stories implied changing how they explained away a crime and ultimately how they presented themselves (Orbuch 1997). By changing the main aspects used in their stories, they managed their identity during the conversations and, furthermore, deepened their relationship with the interviewer (Butler 2005). In Sebastián's case, his story about

independence and not following society's rules was replaced with an account focused on his father and their relationship.

Similarly, I interviewed Joaquín (32) with a gap of two years in between the first and last interviews. He was incarcerated after being caught in the act of robbing a warehouse. His first stories and descriptions of the crime followed the story arch of adventure anecdotes and suggested stoically overcoming challenges (Hankiss 1981):

My first job was so much fun! I was trying to get in [to criminality] and begging my friend's brother to let me join them in a gig. They were so cool, the gang, their lives, their independence. And at that I was only doing a small part, staying outside to tell them if the police came.

Adrenaline, passion, and fun are usual experiences narrated by people in prison about past crimes (Ioannou et al. 2015; Haigh 2009). The experiential aspect of crime has been theorized as a key component of understanding these actions by identifying its phenomenological basis (Katz 2002). The lure and attraction of certain actions (planning a crime, stealing, escaping from the police) are indissociable from the meaning they convey. As Jackson-Jacob (2004) argues, excitement in story-telling is related to the narrative gratification of talking about great feats and achievements. Fights, robberies, and grandiose schemes are described vividly and with excitement: they provide opportunities for the storyteller to manage the potential stigma of being a criminal.

While his self-presentation and description of adventure were initially related to his pursuit of the life of a "high-profile" criminal, they were later oriented towards his family's dynamics:

I come from a dysfunctional family. My mother was never really a caring woman, she was just a provider. My older siblings were not... one was dead before I was five, two in prison, one was constantly high. No wonder I ended up here. [...]. It was hard for me to put my finger on what was wrong in my life.

Notably, the shift in Joaquín's story is denoted by the change in the terms he used. The incorporation of expert language, which was previously absent (i.e., "dysfunctional family"), changes sense-making and reorients accounts. Academic and specialized jargon was adopted to emphasize certain aspects of the story (its link to their personal history, prior adverse experiences, etc.) and to convey the idea that these interpretations are "grounded" in scientific evidence.

Nonetheless, discursive change is also shown by how life events are organized and presented. When I asked Sebastián about his past interviews, he mentioned a change in his "state of mind":

I've learned a lot from this, you know? It's part of a process. I am not done with this change, but I definitely have a new state of mind. A new view of

things. Never believe someone who says that they are completely reformed. It's improving, analyzing what things in life brought you here [to prison].

Self-improvement, personal growth and redemption narratives are dominant discourses in prison (Mcadams et al. 2001; Stone 2016). The idea that prison implies a positive transition and a chance for redefining the self are widespread (Di Marco 2022a; Liles 2018). Socialization in expert theories is linked to these subjective processes. As Maruna (2001) puts it, transformation of the self is not only connected to prevalent worldviews but also to new ways of narrating the self.

In Joaquín's case, a shift from explanations of life emphasizing excitement and individual pursuits (conveying meanings of independence and joy) to accounts stressing family dynamics took place. Biographical reconstructions and reorientation are a crucial goal in certain institutions (Weaver 2019). In total institutions, mortification of the self is connected – at least formally – to subjective transformation (Goffman 1961).

Overall, three main features were common to the changes in autobiographical stories: the use of technical jargon, the adoption of new rationalities, and a general shift from positive emotional descriptions to negative family-centered experiences. Technical language (e.g., dysfunctional family, trauma, reform) are institutional marks in speech (McKendy 2006). Terms which were previously absent in conversation became more prominent and relevant in accounts to explain their lives, experiences, and emotions. Most notably, participants used these terms to explain their criminal activities. Joaquín and Sebastián show how these narrative shifts impacted on their self-presentation.

In broader terms, these new words were connected to expert rationalities and institutionalized disciplines (Giddens 1991; Burchardt 2016). Refocusing their life stories implied a systematic change in life reconstructions, the identification of turning points, and a change in the overall tone of the conversations. Sebastián and Joaquín, for instance, used to highlight either their personal pursuits or their emotions to explain their early steps in crime, yet later focused their accounts on their upbringing. This passage illustrates a general pattern of change in storytelling and, at the same time, in sense-making.

4.2 Missing Contexts

Changes in how stories are told happen throughout people's lives. Contexts shape meanings, accounts, and discursive strategies. Circumstances and bystanders also might change what is considered legitimate to tell in that specific situation. Moreover, ways of organizing an explanation are linked to hegemonic narratives in each context (Bogner and Rosenthal 2017). People change their accounts depending on their strategies and interests in situated scenarios. What stories is it politically viable to tell? Which aspects could be

mentioned without breaching social conventions and norms (Garfinkel 1967)?

In these interviews, the aspects used to organize life stories – elements or *loci* which tie an account together (Di Marco 2022b) – varied along their trajectory in the institutions. In particular, the role and relevance of social and community contexts changed. Dalia (29), for instance, used to stress her looking up to the “cool kids” of their neighborhood to account for her first crime.

I wanted to be like those cool kids from the neighborhood. And I was always a guys' girl. Wanted to hang out with them, and do cool stuff, not play around with dolls. That's how I was introduced to drug-dealing. I guess that, if I hadn't been living there or if I didn't grow up with these guys, things would have turned out differently.

Counterfactual statements, such as that which ends Dalia's narrative, were common in these interviews. Comparing their past with hypothetical situations is a frequent strategy of presenting theories and explanations (Labov 1982). It is also a common way to account for wrongdoing and rationalizing an action (Pereboom 2021).

In a later interview, Dalia argued that her upbringing had had a key impact on her life. While peer pressure was still a relevant aspect of her upbringing, violence in her childhood home was presented as a more significant contributing factor:

There was always, you know, violence, guns at home. It was never an issue, because it was naturalized. It was normal that... for me and my brothers. So, I'd say that if I had a different family, I would not be here. [...]. Hanging out with [my neighbor] was certainly a step into crime, but not as important. Coming from a more normal household would have changed things.

When considering the changes throughout time in how people reconstruct their lives, there is a profound difference between seeing them as a sign of greater self-awareness or as a change in views due to an institutional program. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue, language provides grounds for several interpretations, depending on the epistemological framework.

Dalia revised her beliefs about the possible outcomes of a different upbringing. In doing so, she shifted away from the narratives she used before. Several elements replaced the central role that context had had in the initial story. For instance, gang violence, drugs, and access to firearms were replaced by family dynamics and exposure to childhood violence.

Jonathan (25), for instance, stressed that crime careers are linked to absent father figures:

Not having a father figure is crucial. Because you don't learn limits, you just feel like the king of the world and do whatever the fuck you want. [...] just go and ask all the people here, and you'll see. That's a type of trauma, in childhood.

Providing explanations with generalizations allowed participants to present theories. Stating that certain biographical events (i.e., absent fathers, “negligent mothers,” etc.) frequently underlie the pathways of people in prison allows participants to put a distance between a crime and their self in what is an identity management strategy (Presser 2009). Generally, participants combined these formulae with the passive voice and other ellipses in order to depersonalize their crimes. In dramaturgical terms, interviewees used virtual selves to adapt their roles in playing each scene (Goffman 1961).

The roles given to context and family history varied in the interviews; it seems that the more socialized in institutional discourses the participants were, the less relevance they provided to either systemic or local contexts. Furthermore, the focus of their stories of “problematic youths” resembles the dominant discourses of international organizations, such as the World Health Organization, the Pan-American Health Organization, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (Di Marco 2023).

These interviews do not show a mechanical and total change in explanations. Context is still present in the biographical reconstructions of those who have been in prison for a long period. Nonetheless, the relevance of social and economic contexts in their stories wanes. Similarly, the experiential narration of crime (i.e., excitement, adrenaline, enthusiasm) is still acknowledged, but framed differently. Overall, the structure of rationalizations changes (Tilly 2006). Families’ micro-dynamics gained a predominant role in institutionalized accounts, and the contexts of their lives lose centrality.

4.3 Contested Realities

In the previous sections, I have highlighted changes in explanations and life stories resulting in greater accommodation to official institutional discourse. However, contesting such discourses, especially in relation to “system” narratives, was prevalent in interviews. Moreover, storytelling was a practice that indicated tensions and disputes among worldviews (Mayr 2004): memories, pivotal experiences, and important past events were contested topics for them.

Debora (33) addressed this issue by directly contrasting her views with the perspective of a social worker. Conflicting interpretations of her upbringing are, in her interview, a major topic related to different areas of expertise:

When he [my father] left, you know, my mother started working in the streets again. It was 2002 [economic crisis], and we were in the slums. So, not many options. That stuck with me, because I had to become independent, but, but I didn’t want to be like her, submissive, so I copied what I had in hand, what I knew. Then I started pickpocketing. But to be honest, it’s not just the poverty and the need to survive. I could have done other stuff, but there was something about the fun of stealing. Jimena [social worker] only cares about my family and upbringing, but it’s much more than that.

For some interviewees, the interaction with penal institutions implied encountering a new set of theories and worldviews: being socialized into “formal” rationalities was, in some cases, a matter of conflict. For Debora, claiming the validity of her own interpretation was of the utmost importance. Hence, the perspective of an institutional actor, such as the social worker, was identified, contrasted, critiqued, and, sometimes, replaced with her own views.

Pedro (19) was incarcerated a few months before our first interviews. He challenged the interpretations of the head of the center head on: “Stop it with ‘Mommy’ and ‘Daddy’! Every single time, that’s the issue. I don’t buy it.” “Mommy and daddy,” “trauma,” and “social functions” were terms directly brought up as matters to be discussed. Participants questioned expert knowledge either by being skeptical about their meaning, dubious about the ways in which these terms were used or stating that they were against their own beliefs.

Carina (45), for instance, gestured towards this conflict between lay and expert theories by expressing that it made her feel “conflicted”:

It makes me feel uneasy. Am I crazy, am I not? Should I be taking medication? I don’t believe in all these psychologists working for the state, for the system. But every time I go there [to a session] I end up feeling conflicted. I don’t want them messing up with me by arousing doubts. I don’t need that.

Her view highlights the fact that contestation is not a linear process. On the contrary, it might imply mixed emotions. Furthermore, her case illustrates a more generalized distrust of the state in prisons. In Latin America, suspicion and distrust in public institutions goes beyond the penal system (Parra Saiani et al. 2021). Carina’s critique of the state and its programs is not only a common practice, but also a common discourse to denouncing structural inequalities.

Claiming the ownership of life stories was an ongoing practice during interviews. Referring to one’s own agency, decisions, and interpretations in biographical narratives is a process which not only takes place in the context of an institution (Hyvärinen et al. 2010), but also in the research interaction (Smythe and Murray 2010). As Presser (2005) suggests, the interview can be a vehicle for narrating the self as a moral character. In this case, interviews provided inmates with a chance to talk about themselves, to ask and contest evaluations of their crimes, and to express doubts and concerns about the interpretations of the prison staff.

Debora, Pedro, and Carina challenge expert views on their lives and, most importantly, present alternative stories. Nonetheless, adjusting discourses to fit system narratives (i.e., knowing “what to say,” changing the tone of experiences according to their interlocutors, etc.) was a dominant strategy for most participants. Therefore, the relationship between contestation,

narrative maneuvers, and survival strategies in prison responds to a broader institutional setting.

4.4 Navigating Prison with Narrative Strategies

Contestation and tension in autobiographical processes illustrates the relational nature of storytelling: The contexts and interactions with other actors play a crucial role in how a life is told, which elements are highlighted, and which events are omitted (Butler 2005). Participants like Deborah show how the opinions and theories used by institutional actors can be interpreted, rejected, and partially readapted by people.

Additionally, stories play a crucial role in prison pathways: They are an essential resource to navigate courthouses, trials, and educational programs (O'Connor 2000; Rowe 2011). In this context, stories are used as an essential transactional material or capital (Burchardt 2016). In this sense, knowing which aspects are at stake when talking about their lives to prison staff might help in understanding the institutional frame of discourse. Applying for “benefits,” achieving a certificate of “good conduct,” and aligning their discourses with those of the prison authorities were some of the reasons they adapted their stories.

David (29), for instance, referred to obtaining “benefits” in the prison system by using certain actions and stories:

This is how it works [to get benefits]. You add points, so to speak, by taking classes, signing up for university, showing good conduct, complying with the house rules. That's in general how it works, but [winks his eye] one knows that all that stuff must be accompanied by a way of being seen. [...]. For the staff who evaluate our behavior, that's basically telling them what they want to hear. They aren't dumb, but they and we know what should be said. [...]. That we are not victims of circumstance; that we have to claim responsibility, and we have to trace the problem back to our lives.

Two analytical points can be made from David's perspective. First, the use of stories is a matter that is discussed and theorized by people in prison. While the topic was addressed only by a few participants, it still indicates that interviewees made sense of each narrative, its symbolic use, and its relevance in the eyes of the prison authorities. David clearly identified “tracing the problem back” as a story that should be reproduced when talking to the authorities. Second, it also shows the interactional nature of the narratives. The mutual agreement in the use of stories and self-presentations indicates that these narratives are resources to be exchanged.

As David's statement shows, hegemonic narratives are not taken-for-granted discourses (Zerubavel 2018). On the contrary, some participants talked about how these imposed speeches are interpreted, adopted, and skillfully used to navigate in the system.

Similarly, Johanna (32) talked about obtaining a certificate of “good conduct” by having a low profile in prison:

I know for a fact that they [prison staff] want us to lie low, obey, and avoid, well, being a nuisance. So, I try to be invisible. Especially because of my crime [sexual assault of a minor]. Not getting into trouble, avoiding fights and never saying my actual opinion. Just repeat that I am fucked up, sticking to what they want to hear, that I had a terrible childhood. Otherwise, all hell breaks loose. [...]. It's what they want to hear.

Considering narratives as a capital implies that they are unequally distributed. For certain people – especially those with a stigmatizing label – the value of adhering to official stories is higher (Crewe 2009; Goffman 1961). Johanna stresses her particular situation yet shows a broader trend in “sticking to” a dominant discourse.

Strategies are not only individual practices, but they are also socially regulated. Adrián (44), who has been in prison for ten years, suggested that preparing before talking to psychologists and probation officers is a collective task. “Talking about them, how they will evaluate us and so on, is a defensive strategy.” Aligning the narratives with an official standard was highlighted by the three interviewees, underscoring how certain ideas circulate in prison.

As these cases illustrate, narratives do not change naively. People in prison acknowledge how deploying certain stories facilitates their navigation in this institution. Talking about their redemption, “exploiting” childhood memories, and referencing personal traits are just some of the practices that storytellers in prison follow. As Gaucher (2002, 7) suggests, storytelling can be a means of survival in a carceral setting, a technique to “withstand the dislocation that prison life creates.” The use of these stories as interactional assets illustrates a way of going through prison and still retaining agency.

While few participants addressed this issue straightforwardly, the fact that some interviewees were upfront about the utilitarian nature of storytelling is an indicator of the relevance of “family narratives.” However, the actual efficiency or adequacy of these strategies to achieve a desired presentation of the self cannot be analyzed using these data.

5. Discussion: Between Imposition and Calculation

The accounts analyzed in this paper illustrate how institutional discourses shape the storytelling of people in prison. Furthermore, the paper has shown how penal institutions foster and guide family-centered interpretations of lived experiences. Nonetheless, interviews also indicate how storytelling and discourse allow resistance, negotiation, and strategies while living in prison. Previous research has rarely asked how narratives of incarcerated people change throughout their convictions, given the geopolitical nature of these

narratives. By analyzing people's stories, this study argues that dominant narratives tend to decontextualize life stories and foreground the role of the family – particularly the absence of parents – to explain the onset of crime.

Temporality plays a key role in this analysis. Fieldwork encounters over prolonged periods of time provide the opportunity to address changes in social processes and the effects of contextual circumstances on people's lives (Rabelo and Souza 2003; Schepher-Hughes 1992). The stories that are told are framed within the culturally inherited possibilities that are grounded in the lived contexts. For this interpretation, I assume that the first conversations were likely to be more shaped by extra-carceral discourses (i.e., folk/popular narratives, gang stories), while later interviews were marked by institutionalized ways of talking (McKendy 2006). This approach proved to be useful in inquiring into narrative change.

Theories about trauma, upbringing, family dynamics, and identity formation, among others, pervaded the stories of the participants. In some cases, the “absent father figure” was referenced to account for a crime; in others, exposure to childhood violence was pivotal in explaining their current situations. Participants incorporated technical terms and rationalities as a resource to convey meaning. The change in language and rationale showed how expert knowledge shaped lived experience (Fassin 2009) and the storytelling of criminal careers (Tompalski and Romanik 2019; Kilty 2012). Overall, being in prison implied referencing institutionalized narratives that were previously absent in their accounts. Folk theories about crime and violence were merged with expert knowledge taught in prisons (Bottoms 2006; Di Marco 2022b). As Crewe (2009) argues, subjective changes in prisons might coincide with forms of compliance and engagement with the carceral space. Aligning stories and emotions to official scripts could be interpreted as part of an integration process.

The shift in discourse was not a linear process. Some participants challenged official narratives, critically assessed their conversations with prison staff (e.g., social workers, psychologists), and openly argued against mainstream interpretations of crime by presenting alternative theories (Connell 2007). As Gaucher (2002) states, stories are part of the resistance to official discourse. Other interviewees mimicked expert interpretations of their lives. Interviews can provide participants with the chance to present a version of themselves and, in this case, to claim agency and ownership of their life stories (Presser 2005). Moreover, this shows that people in prison are not “cultural dopes” and that some masterfully readapt their speech. Stories are a key resource allowing them to read their environment and act upon it (O'Connor 2000; Burchardt 2016).

Inevitably, narrative economies in prison draw on institutionalized categories (such as “dysfunctionality” and “trauma”) that require new forms of storytelling and self-presentation (Burchardt 2016). Hence, narrative change is

neither a mechanical nor a homogenous process. While the adoption of dominant discourses varied, the interviews still show a pattern of guided narrative change towards family-focused accounts.

While the phenomenological experiences of crime and life were predominantly left out in the later self-narrations, these remain “visible” when talking about the family. Economic and social circumstances in narratives of the family (i.e., poverty, structural and local violence) reference experiences in their lives. However, these are presented as external contributing factors more than inner sensible dimensions of their actions. Therefore, the centrality and focus of the narration of experience and emotions change.

Desistance is inextricably related to the changes identified in this paper (Maruna 2001; Sampson and Laub 1993). Making sense of the crime and reconstructing life stories took place in varied ways. Criminological studies applying desistance theory have pointed out that changes in life trajectory pushing criminal activity away are linked to subjective change (Presser 2008; Weaver 2019; Gadd and Farrall 2004). Additionally, these interviews were inseparable from the broader process of subjective transformation (Cid and Martí 2012) and consequently from the mortification of the self (Goffman 1961). This paper does not intend to discuss narrative change in light of desistance, although it is certainly connected to personal changes in light of institutional policies of knowledge. My argument relies on how storytelling is shaped by prison and institutional expert knowledge, its political implications, and its geopolitical basis.

Contrary to the belief that the frameworks used to understand initiation into crime are innocuous, this paper argues that they have concrete subjective and political effects (Cortez 2022). The alienation of the life stories of the incarcerated in favor of the official discourse has a direct impact on peripheral family groups through social policies, which have increasingly been the target of institutionalized prejudice and suspicion (Ferreccio 2017; Wacquant 2021). While the focus on the family can be part of a global process, this ushers in harsher consequences for people living in historically marginalized regions (Melossi et al. 2017; Travers 2017).

Dominant institutional theories and approaches guide interventions and, consequently, people’s discourses (Collyer et al. 2019; Dimou 2021). In this case, narratives shape stories told, focusing explanations of crime and violence on the offenders’ families. Community contexts and economic circumstances were often left out of this equation. Following the concept of theory effect (Bourdieu 1991), dominant discourses effectively alter social grammar and signify experiences.

As Cortez (2022) argues, hegemonic criminological theories play a significant role in legislation, policies, and intervention programs. Hence, the theoretical foundations of the design of prison systems have considerable implications. As shown above, these theories orient storytelling. Narratives are not

mechanically imposed; people reflect upon them and deploy them to navigate institutions. Nonetheless, the change in their accounts individualized their lives and moves away from a comprehensive sociological understanding of crime.

The outcome of official discourses tended to be stories that omitted the meso- and macro-social foundations of crime, such as economic structure and even the meaning of crime. The lack of acknowledgement of local history, which is a distinctive aspect of colonial metropolitan theory (Connell 2007), flag the depolitization of penal discourse. For the current Global Sociology project (Hanafi 2019), this process is noteworthy. Since linking knowledge production at the international and local levels is key in generating sociological knowledge, comprehending how official narratives shape institutional practices and peoples' lives and actions is fundamental. This provides insights into how knowledge shapes state programs and people living in vastly different contexts.

This research does not deny the connection between the impact of vital events on the lives of people and the development of criminal careers. Nevertheless, I discuss how mechanistic applications of this theory ignore the political nature of such theories. The underlying assumptions of this approach (i.e., its universal value, its implications in specific social scenarios) need to be discussed further.

The findings presented here have implications for future research and policy-making. The questions about narrative and subjective change have been a staple topic in the social and human sciences, including criminology (Harding et al. 2016; Maruna and Copes 2012). How and why discourses transform, reconfigure and “adapt” are fundamental questions when thinking about prison, violence, and power devices. My intention was to inquire about a specific aspect of this: how institutional pathways shape self-narrations. In the future, analyzing the perspectives of prison staff could provide a more comprehensive picture of how narratives of people in prison change. Furthermore, identifying autobiographical practices would contribute to understanding the institutional framework of this phenomenon.

6. Conclusion

By analyzing how the life stories of people in Argentinean prisons change over time, this paper draws two main conclusions. First, accounts of the crimes and biographical reconstructions tend to incorporate technical terms that have been institutionalized in the penal system, focus on the family, ignore previously present references to joy and fun in criminal pursuits, and exclude broader socio-economic contexts. Therefore, the progressive erasure of the life stories of the incarcerated in favor of the official discourses of

the prison institution helps to blur the contextual conditions of their lives. Second, deploying certain stories and adhering to “system” discourses about biography and childhood gives them access to resources, and helps them navigate the institution and acquire valuable assets in prison (such as a “good conduct” certificate). Additionally, challenging and reflecting upon official narratives allows people to reclaim agency over their own life stories. This finding underscores how stories have a symbolic value in the narrative economy of the prison.

This paper is based on the belief that analyzing how institutions select, present, and impose their expert theories reveals the underlying political economy. The prevalent narratives in prison tend to exclude the contexts of people’s lives and attempt to alienate their biographies. Given the colonial origins of criminological theories and the geopolitical nature of “treatment” programs, this paper argues that the way in which narratives change is key to understanding transnational networks of knowledge production. The focalization on family dynamics and childhood experiences coincides with the prevailing policing of peripheral groups and a tendency to ignore the material conditions that shape people’s biographies. Making visible how knowledge circulates and is adopted by penal devices promotes a critical understanding of the penal system and expert knowledge.

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doi: [10.12759/hsr.48.2023.37](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.48.2023.37)

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